



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 154

SUICIDE

The death of a friend, colleague, or family member as the result of suicide is a tragic event that is difficult or often impossible to understand. When a member of our Coast Guard family ends their own life, we are all affected directly or indirectly by this loss. **In the wake of the most recent suicide of an active duty Coast Guard member, our sense of loss has been compounded by the apparent misinformation that exists regarding the number of suicides that have occurred within the Coast Guard in recent years.** Adding to our difficulty to understand these tragic events is the fact that there are few consistent patterns or trends that can be determined from our review of statistics to explain why these suicides have occurred.

As we collectively engage in efforts to deal with this important issue in the most effective manner, it is important that accurate information regarding suicide rates be made available. **Regrettably, we have had four active duty suicides in FY-01. Over the past ten years, we have averaged five suicides and 23 suicide attempts among active duty members each year.** While these numbers may appear high to some, based on our active duty population, our numbers are comparable to national statistics.

Although we may not be able to determine why someone has committed suicide, there are some warning signs and symptoms of potential suicide victims, and actions that can be taken if these signs or symptoms are noticed. Earlier this year, for Suicide Awareness and Prevention Week, we published ALCOAST 220/01, which provided this information. Similar information was also distributed in Flag Voice 81, which addressed Suicide Prevention.

The Suicide Data Bank of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has just completed their first phase of a study designed to provide information that will allow us to better understand a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior prior to suicide. The results of this phase of the study provide us with information that can help us identify a potential suicide victim and offer help and resources to prevent a suicide. **Three factors were identified as "markers" for what the study referred to as a suicide crisis. These "markers" include:**

1. **A precipitating event** - examples include the loss of a relationship on which the victim was dependent, the collapse of a career, or the fatal illness of a child.
2. **A person's affective state** - feelings of desperation, a sudden sense of abandonment, anxiety, rage, guilt, or humiliation appear to compound a person's depression. Of these factors, humiliation resulting from social or occupational failures, and desperation, plays a major role in precipitating an already depressed person into suicide.

3. Behavioral manifestations - three behavioral signs were identified: (1) speech (verbalized suicidal ideations), (2) actions (making an actual suicide attempt), (3) escalating self-mutilating or self-destructive behavior (substance abuse, speeding in a vehicle, a deterioration in everyday functioning which led to difficulties with employers or supervisors, absenteeism, loss of control, temper tantrums, breakups in relationships, or social withdrawal).

We should remember that a person who is in this kind of distress cannot make a rational decision. Although they desperately want to live, their pain is so intense that they want to make the pain stop, regardless of the cost.

In a HIGH OPTEMPO organization such as the Coast Guard, we will inevitably come across individuals who will be exhibiting these signs and symptoms. Each of us must make the commitment to become familiar with and recognize these symptoms, identify individuals that may be in trouble, and seek assistance. In doing so you may very likely be helping to save someone's life.

As an individual that may be suffering from depression, or thoughts of suicide, it is important to remember that you should not keep suicidal thoughts to yourself; **help is available. Reach out to a friend, a therapist, a family member, a religious/spiritual leader, or to the support network provided by the Coast Guard.**

Members of Team CG can obtain confidential assistance through the **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. The EAP is a professional counseling and referral service designed to help you with your personal, job or family problems. It is free, voluntary, and **confidential**. This program provides professional counselors that are prepared to assist you with virtually any issue or problem that may arise, including but not limited to concerns such as emotional, family, relationships, alcohol/drug use, job problems, and legal or financial problems. To obtain assistance, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, simply call **1-800-222-0364**.

You can also call or visit an **Employee Assistance Program Coordinator (EAPC)** at a regional work-life staff, which are located at Integrated Support Commands across the country. To contact the office nearest you, **call 1-800-872-4957** followed by the extension listed next to these ISC locations: Alameda (252), Boston (301), Cleveland (309), Honolulu (314), Ketchikan (317), Kodiak (563), Miami (307), New Orleans (308), Portsmouth, (305), San Pedro (311), Seattle (313), St. Louis (302), and Washington, DC (932). Discussions of problems with an EAPC are also **confidential**.

You may also seek help from the **Chaplain Corps**, which is another confidential source of assistance, or from military treatment facilities that are on call 24 hours a day to assist you.

The most difficult step in dealing with any problem that appears to be too big to handle is to ask for help. The majority of people around us, whether they are a friend or a stranger, are willing to help someone in need. When you or a friend are facing difficult times, it may seem that to ask for help may be viewed as an admission of weakness; to the contrary, **asking for help is a sign of strength**. It is the most significant step that you can take toward addressing and resolving the problems that face you. **If you should find yourself facing troubling times that seem too difficult to handle alone, reach out to someone, anyone, and ask for help. You will likely be surprised just how quickly and effectively someone can help you address your problems.**

Regards, FL Ames



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